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SOCIAL MEDIA: A VENT FOR CITIZEN JOURNALISM

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Abstract:

Citizen journalism has hustled and amplified news as well as information production, consumption together with circulation on a massive scale. Thanks to modern smart phones, citizens' daily occurrences ranging from mundane encounters with other laymen, public officials or governmental bodies have made their way into social media on a large scale. In accordance, public members' woes besides their worries and concerns get broadcast, enrich and saturate social media's content incessantly. However, this article contends that such unaccustomed usage is not without any consequences.

Ever since the Arab Spring tumults, both governments and common people alike grasped social media's weight. On the one side, social members have become more daring. They are more likely to record and share their mishaps as well as experiences. On the other side, governmental authorities have grown more alert about citizens' posts on social media networks. Former incidents show that as the latter officials are becoming more responsive to citizens' claims, the former agents are growing more uninhibited despite newly-adopted laws.

The running paper seeks to find out not only what usages present-day individuals make out of social media, but also the implications as well as the consequences behind such fresh utilization. Specific focus is geared towards figuring out if this immense involvement with social media entails any democratization or political effect(s). To respond to the study's questions, the writer delivered a questionnaire via several communication avenues. Findings indicate that contemporary netizens handle social media together with Instant Messaging Applications in totally innovative ways.

Key words: Citizen Journalism, Social Media, Social Members, Instant Messaging Applications, Mishaps and Occurrences.

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Introduction

Technological developments embodied in the availability of the Internet and the accessibility of social media are not only impacting the dissemination of both information and the news, but their worldwide production as well. That is, these technological advances are strongly subverting established media practices of producing and diffusing information and the news. Thanks to these technological breakthroughs, the former activities of information and news production as well as diffusion are no longer the exclusive province of media professionals.

In accordance, such technological innovations are redefining essential journalism practices. Indeed, any individual in possession of a smartphone, computer or tablet, with access to the Internet and social media platforms may post their opinions, information and news stories online. In other words, what used to be costly, effort and time-consuming decades ago is nowadays publicly accessible as anyone can turn their phone on, provided they can secure a stable and quick Internet connection, and go live on *Facebook* (*FB*), *Twitter*, *Instagram*, etc., in a matter of seconds.

In this respect, the massive involvement of the masses with independent social networking sites (SNS), like *Youtube*, *FB*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *FB* and *Yahoo Messengers*, etc., is no longer questionable. Numerous studies, such as AIMC (2020a), AIMC (2020b), point to the masses' heavy exposure to social media networks, especially during times of crises as Covid-19 or the Arab Spring, etc. So, such sizeable utilization of SNSs is taken for granted in the running study as people that used once to be audience members are increasingly giving up such receptive role and are taking to SNSs which they choose their news stories, photos and video recordings that they think are worthy of posting online.

Therefore, these users, citizen journalists, are increasingly performing the work that professional journalists and media professionals in general used to and are expected to do. These users, in other words, are involved in what is nowadays commonly referred to as Citizen Journalism (CJ).

In this regard, the assassination of the black American George Floyd would not have reached millions of global viewers, made it through mainstream media, shaken international and American public opinion and gained the sympathy of the international community if Darnella Frazier had not recorded the incident on her phone and posted it on social media where it went viral. The video was also used during the trial as a crime evidence implicating the American police officer. In short, without the involvement of this citizen journalist, such event may have gone unnoticed and would not have gained such tremendous magnitude.

In fact, this practice on the part of citizen journalists is not very new. It floated to the scene in 2001, on the 9/11 incident when some citizens shared their recorded material on the net. Then, the practice of CJ became quite renowned when some citizens posted pictures and recordings of both the Indonesian tsunami floods in December 26th, 2004 and the London suicide bombing on July 7th, 2005. Ever since, these discrete incidents, the practice of CJ gained more prominence that the Qatari satellite channel Aljazeera set up its

Sharek portal enabling users to upload their own video recordings ever since late 2007. But this portal gained more popularity during the Arab Spring 2010 – 2011 uprisings. Yet, such practice is not any innovative on the part of Aljazeera since the American channel CNN had already initiated such venture and invited users to post their own content on *iReport* platform since 2006.

In Morocco, individuals who share the same interests or else that have similar professions constitute numerous *WhatsApp*, *Telegram* as well as *FB Messenger* discussion groups in which they exchange content about common concerns, organize meetings or even arrange demonstrations to stand up for their claims and defend their rights. Likewise, several *WhatsApp* groups are formed by suppliers and sellers who decided to display and sell goods and propose their services over SNSs attempting to reach out far-flung online shoppers. These e-commerce dedicated groups emerged and flourished during and post Covid-19.

In parallel, several forums and pages over Instagram and FB, such as *maroc Insolite* (Morocco's unusual), Lfercha (disclosure), *الحامض السياسي* (Political Sour), *سلطتكم الخامسة*(Your fifth estate), *Tarbiya maroc* (Morcco's education) , *Insta maroc* (Morocco's instantaneity), *تجمع الأساتذة*(Teachers' gathering), *Rasd Ch3b* (people's monitor), *واقع التربية و التعليم* (Education & Learning Reality), allow and invite users to expose their opinions and issues of common concerns. Likewise, numerous forums and pages like Anmouddo Travel, Let's go Simo Agency, Let's go travel together, Family voyage & événement (Familial travel & events), etc., invite travelers to upload photosand share their travel experiences. Similarly, multiple electronic TV networks and applications, such as *Shoof TV*, *Daily maroc*, *Télé Maroc*, proliferate over FB, Instagram, etc., enjoy large viewership and invite interested people to request interviews and record videos to be broadcast over these channels. In the same way, almost all online Moroccan newspapers as *Hespress*, *Hibapress*, *Febrayer*, etc., allow browsers to comment on their news and post their opinions.

Indeed, the proliferation of these interactive and open pages, sites, v/blogs, etc., has caught our attention and raised our curiosity. Accordingly, we undertook this study to respond to two **research questions**, namely:

1) What social networks do different people use? And

2) What for do they use such networks?

In accordance, to respond to these questions, we assume the following **hypotheses**, chiefly:

H1: Our study respondents regularly attend to FB, WhatsApp and Youtube.

H2: Our poll informants use such networks for gaining fun, knowledge and for sharing their opinions.

I. Citizen Journalism: theoretical background

Citizen journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon that has gained an unprecedented momentum due to the potential repercussions its content might most likely bring about. Alexander Levine (2008) underline that the web 2.0 platform's two features of micro-content and social software have been very elemental in the development of CJ. The micro-content feature enables users to create small chunks of information whose storage does not require much space and whose uploading does not necessitate any web design expertise. The second feature, social software, refers to social media which are organized around people. Both of these aspects create, according to Alexander and Levine, "a series of synergistic effects, including conversations that occur across multiple sites and with multiple conversations" (p. 42).

Likewise, Lejla Turcilo (2017) insists on the significance of online media aspects in sustaining and enhancing CJ. These characteristics include firstly the attenuation of the domination of institutionalized news sources; the ability of collecting and sharing content over multiple channels and forms secondly; interactivity and participation thirdly; the possibility of anybody publishing content fourthly; user linkages fifthly; and the possibility of striking discussions ultimately (p. 54).

Similarly, Flew (2008) believes that the initial inauguration of CJ goes back to 1999 with the development of open publishing architecture by Mathew Arnison and others involved in the 'Active Sydney Group', as well as the adoption of open source models like Independent Media Centers (*Indymedia*), which was a milestone that enabled novel forms of news production. Flew also mentions another event that was a turning point in the propagation of CJ, mainly the launch of the Korean website *ohmyNews.com* by the journalist Oh Yeon-Ho who got dissatisfied with Korea's conservative traditional media. *OhmyNews*' motto 'every citizen is a reporter' encourages everyone having some news stories to share to share them with others. This, in fact, points out to the basic underlying features of CJ we bring up in the following definitions.

In this regard, Aparna Dwivedi (2013) mentions that the term 'Citizen Journalism' was coined by Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) who defines it as "The transformative processes they bring about within participants and their communities" (p. 8). The author illustrates that CJ is a citizen-generated content that emerged as a response to exclusive mainstream media that most often ignores some social segments and public interests.

Moreover, Kolodzy (2006) expounds that CJ is the consequence of "a citizen or citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (p. 220). Allan (2006) also advocates a corresponding account, chiefly "anyone with something to say and access to the right software can be a publisher, a pundit and an observer of events great or small" (p. 121). In other words, both authors stress the shift of audiences from passive receivers to active, interactive and productive agents; hence, Jay Rosen's (2008) account that CJ occurs "when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another " (§, 1).

These press tools, in addition, include publishing software, digital cameras and video camcorders, blogging software, and social media websites for posting material online. Thanks to these tools, people can upload their audio and video clips, reports, pictures on different blogs and forums. This is why, Stuart Allen (2009), who uses the labels 'grassroots journalism and participatory journalism' stresses the comprehensive and unexclusive features of CJ when he stresses that it "includes someone who happens to be in the right place at the wrong time with their smartphone in their pocket and has the presence of mind to bear witness to something unfolding before them" (p. 277). Indeed, CJ allows any individual who possesses any of the afore-mentioned means to broadcast their content online and make their voices publicly heard.

Furthermore, Dave Roos (2021) insists on the fact that it is the members of the public who contribute into CJ rather than the media professionals; henceforth, his assertion that "citizen journalism refers to any type of news gathering and reporting, writing and publishing articles about a newsworthy topic, or posting photographs or videos of a newsworthy event that is done by members of the general public rather than the professional news agencies commonly referred to as 'mainstream media" (§, 1). In other words, it is common untrained people who take part in CJ by sharing distinct content forms which they deem worthwhile.

However, the expansive opportunities CJ procures entail not only significant advantages but serious drawbacks as well. First of all, it enables the underprivileged and the underrepresented, who are often marginalized in mainstream media, to make their voices heard. This is of paramount importance since it gives ordinary people the possibility to challenge censorship and repression often set by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. In this respect, Dimitry Yagodin (2014) mentions the practice of "offshore blogging" (p. 46) wherein offshore bloggers write about and their country's events but from outside their homeland. In other words, CJ is an enhancement of the standards of democracy as it embodies the ideal of freedom of expression. Consequently, citizen journalists subvert and transcend media organizations' monopoly and hegemony over news production. Nevertheless, CJ, in the wrong hands, often turns out a golden opportunity for the spread of hate speech, misinformation and libelous statements, which may ruin individuals and businesses' reputation, nurture fear, instigate hatred, trigger uprisings and menace peoples' lives as well governments' stability. In short, CJ is a double-edged sword whose usages comprise both conspicuous benefits and deep-seated disadvantages.

II- Methodology

This study utilizes the mixed methods design by combining both observation and the questionnaire as a means of data collection. It relies on the participant observation since most, if not all, of the study's informants are either the researcher's workmates, acquaintances or students. The study also depends on an online survey that elicits both qualitative and quantitative data which will be analyzed descriptively. Interpretation and implications are inferred deductively. The questionnaire was computed on google forms and

was released on the web on July 10th, 2022. Then, the link was shared with our contacts' lists by e-mail or via WhatsApp and FB messenger. The data was retrieved on July 15th, 2022. Over five days, we obtained 121 responses, 62 females and 59 males.

Apart from personal information, such as age, sex and job, our questionnaire sought to find out the social media networks our respondents use, how long they use them and what for they utilize such media avenues. In different terms, the survey aims at understanding our informants' social media involvement behavior by exposing the networks they use, the frequency and duration as well as the purposes behind such utilization.

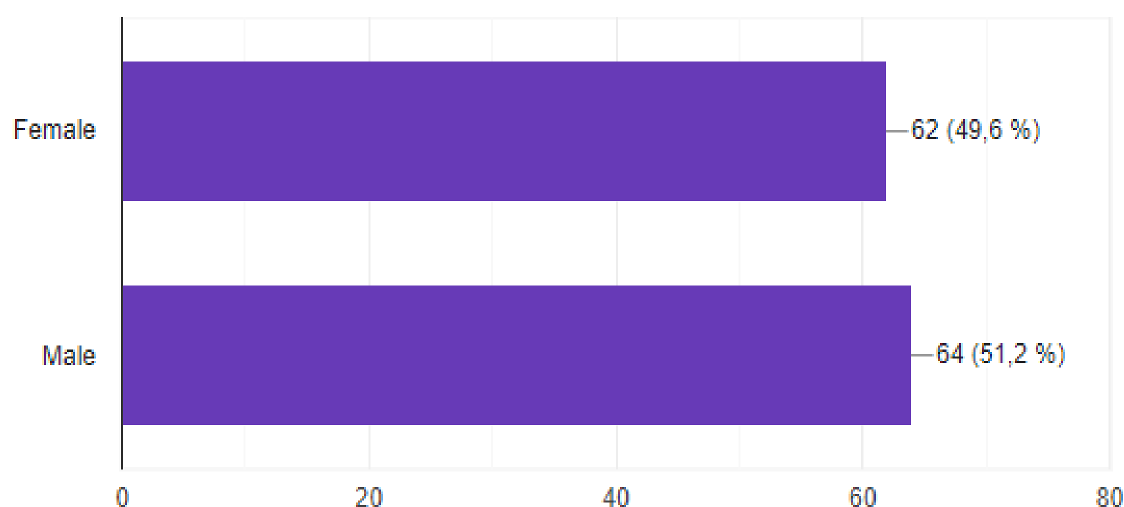
Though we tried to diversify and enlarge our population sample, this objective confronted two basic hurdles. First, because the poll is devised in English language, only literate informants that comprehend it could fill in the form. Thus, we ended up dealing mostly with students and educators who monopolize the lion share of our sample. In accordance, some age categories and some occupations are not or are slightly represented. So, some correlational variables, such as which age category or members of which job utilize which social media network and why, would barely be considered.

Secondly, besides this linguistic impediment, the e-mail requirement to accede into the questionnaire equally hindered some participants not possessing valid e-mails. In fact, this prerequisite was stressed so that informants would not send more than one response. So, our objective of having a large sample could have been met if we had used the local dialect, Moroccan or Standard Arabic and removed the e-mail requisite. Nevertheless, our population sample is quite varied as it involves nearly identical gender respondents, particularly 62 females and 59 males. The survey also spans a period of five decades, 54 precisely, by including informants whose age ranges from 18 years to 72 years old. Yet, only two age and job categories, namely [18-28] comprising students mostly and [40 - 50] involving our workmates, profusely got involved with our poll.

III - The survey findings:

3.1. Respondents' sex:

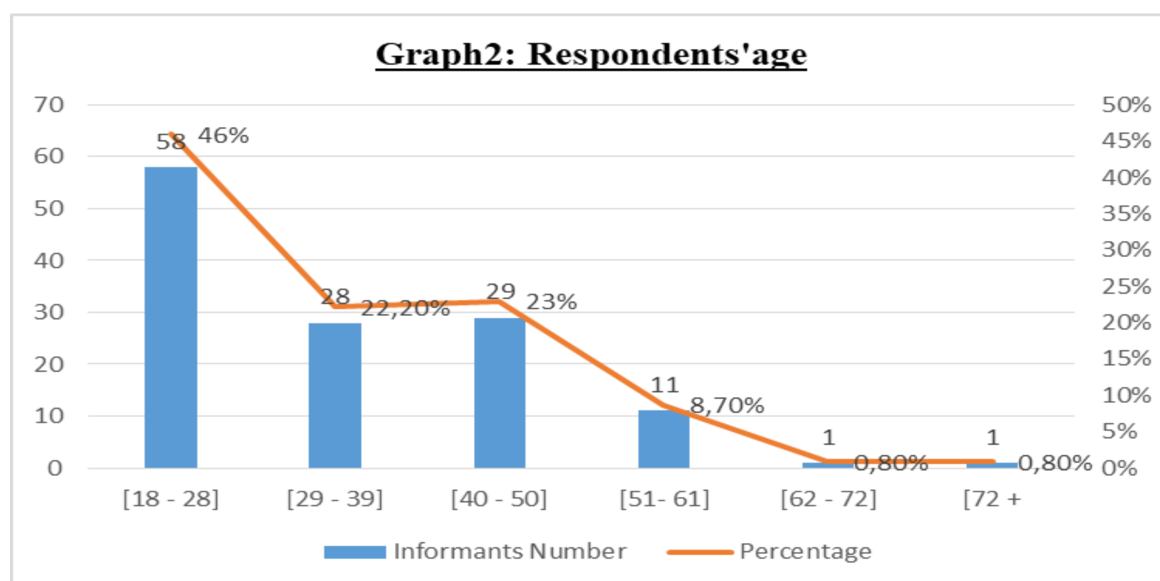
The following graph shows the gender composition of our study sample. Indeed, 126 informants got involved with our online survey. Slightly more than half of these, namely 64 individuals are males, while 62 participants, representing 49.6% of the whole sample, are females.



Graph$_1$: Informants' gender composition

3.2. Respondents' age :

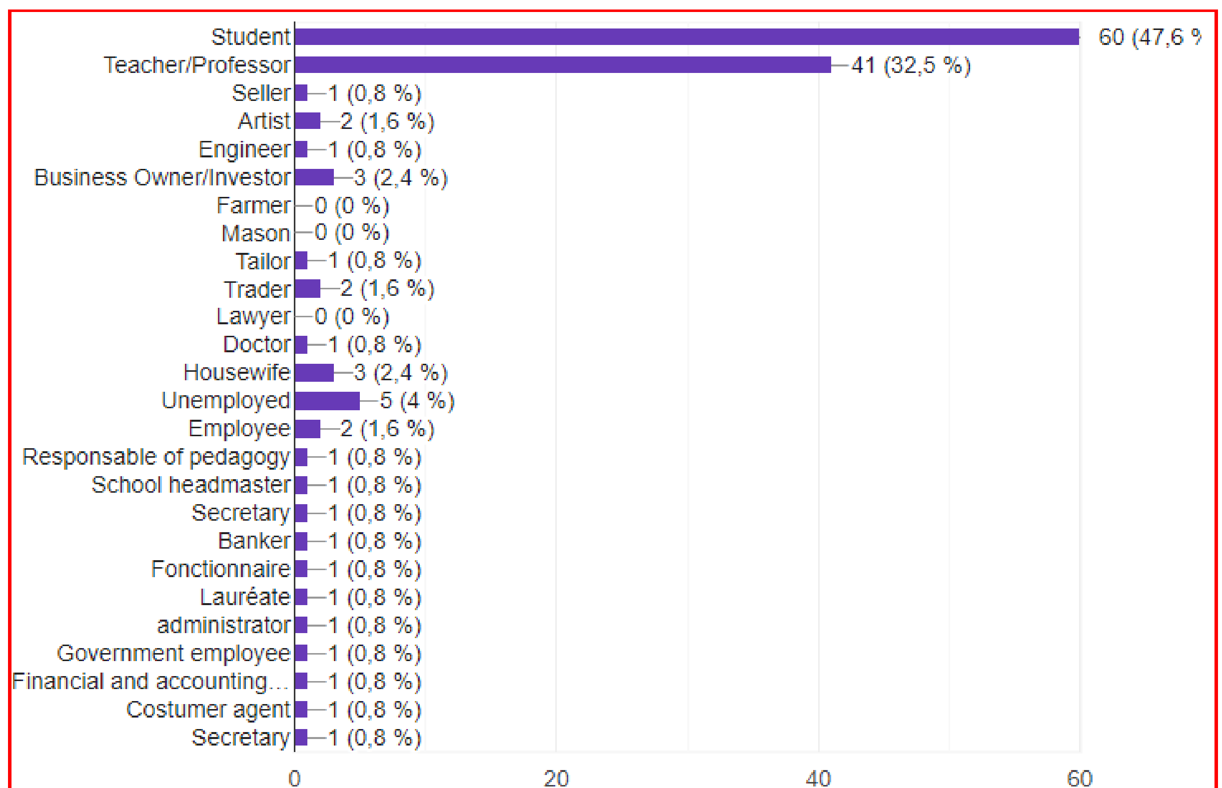
Our study sample involves six age categories ranging from 18 to 72 years which were divided into 6 classes of 10 years each for purposes of consistency. However, almost our entire sample falls only within the first three categories with the youngest class comprised between [18 – 28] monopolizing nearly half our informants. This group is mostly formed by our students, while our workmates generally form the second class whose age ranges from 40 to 50; whereas our master learners constitute the third category whose age is contained between 29 and 39. Hence, the following graph:



3.3. Informants' jobs:

While several jobs are represented in our sample, only members of the educational field form a sizeable majority with 60 students, making up 48% and 41 teachers/professors

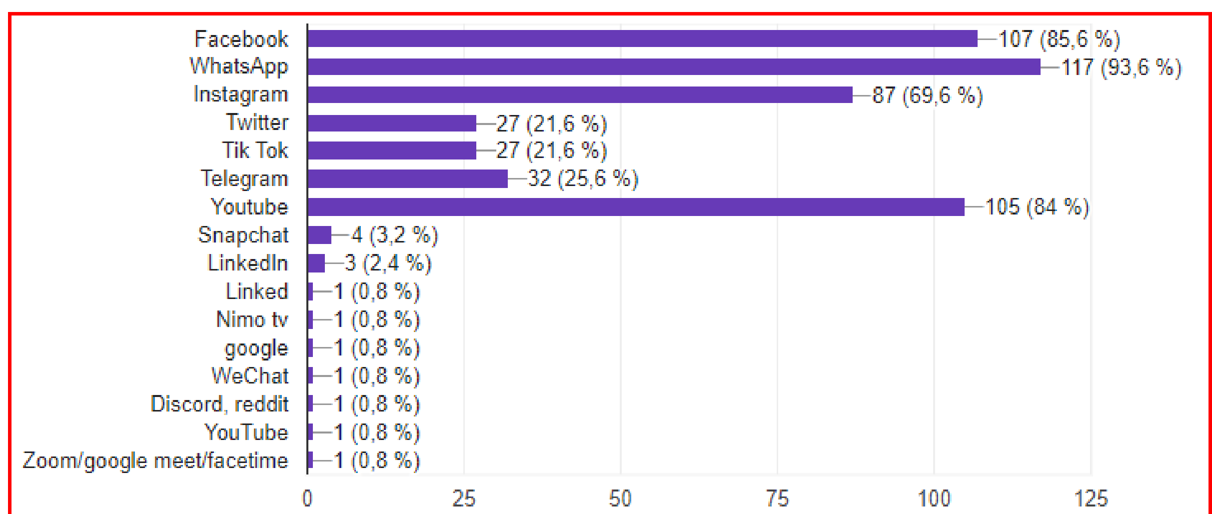
forming 32.8% of the individuals that took part in our study. The other jobs, as the next graph conveys, are quite insignificant.



Graph3: Respondents' jobs

3.4. Social media networks informants attend to:

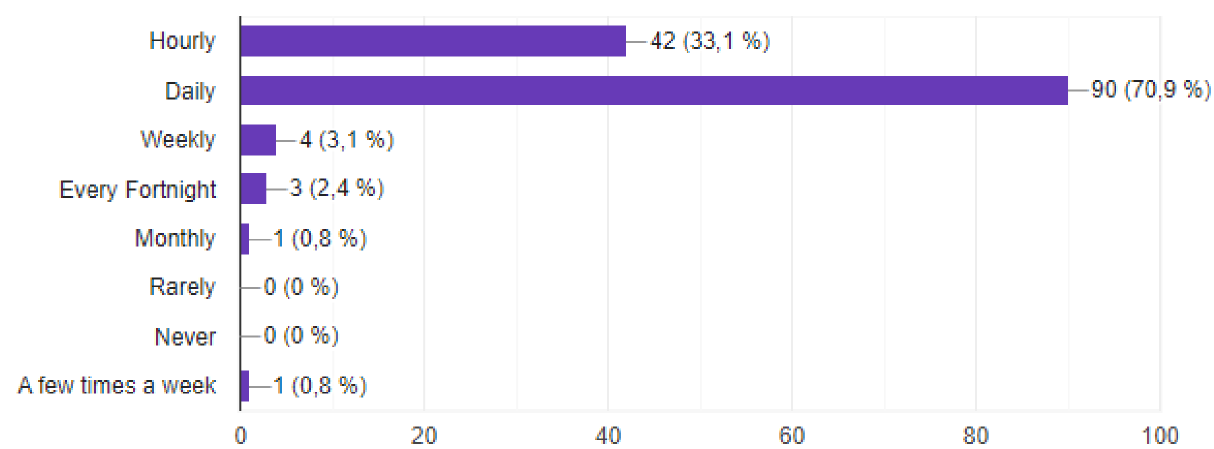
Our study informants mention four social networks as the most media outlet they attend to. A sizeable majority of our sample, namely 117 respondents forming 93.6% bring up ***WhatsApp***. While 107 study participants forming 85.6%, attend to ***Facebook***, 105 partakers put ***Youtube*** on the third rank monopolizing 84%. Also, 87 individuals forming 69.6% of the informants that got involved with our poll mention ***Instagram*** while ***Twitter, Tik Tok*** and ***Telegram*** are slightly familiar among our sample.



Graph4: Social media networks informants attend to.

3.5. Respondents' frequency of attendance to social media networks:

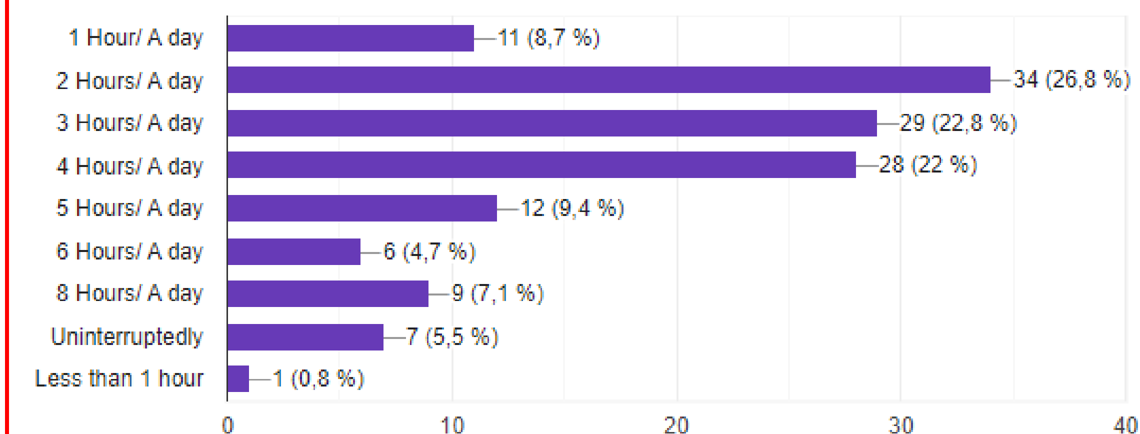
A quicker look at the following graph5 suggests that more than two-thirds of our sample, namely 90 informants representing 70.9%, get involved with social media networks on a daily-basis. Another portion, chiefly 42 of our respondents who constitute 33.1%, utilize SNS on an hourly-basis.



Graph$_5$: Respondents' frequency of attendance to social media networks.

3. 6. Respondents' involvement with social media networks' duration:

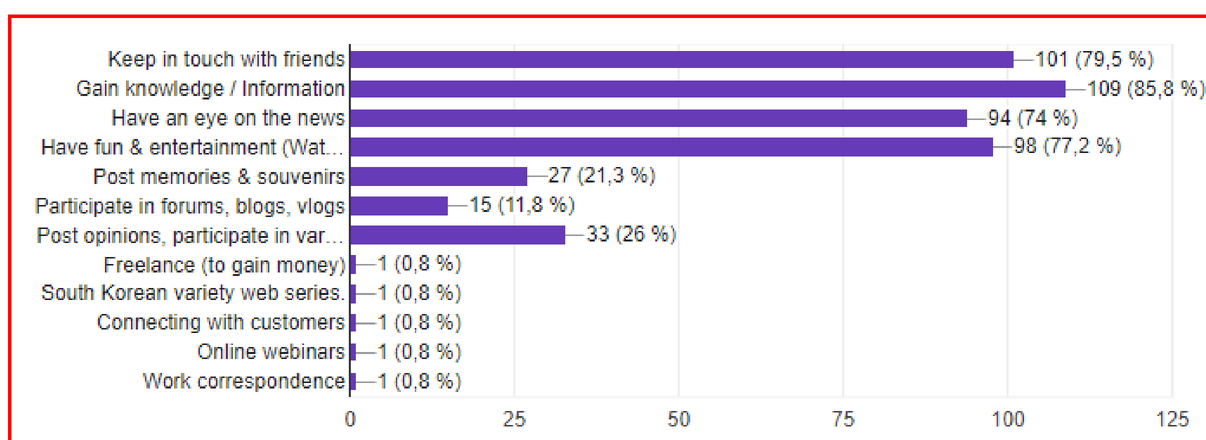
The next Graph$_6$ conveys the duration of use of the above-mentioned networks by our study respondents. In accordance, 7 members utilize the SNSs uninterruptedly while 9 subjects use them 8 hours a day. Whereas 11 individuals attend to SNSs one hour a day; 34 informants get involved with such SNSs 2 hours a day; 29 subjects 3 hours a day; 28 participants 4 hours a day; 12 individuals 5 hours a day and 6 respondents 6 hours a day; but only one individual uses SNSs less than an hour a day.



Graph$_6$: Respondents' involvement with social media networks' duration.

3. 7. Respondents' involvement with social media networks' purposes:

The following $Graph_7$ communicates the wherefores behind our respondents' involvement with social media networks. In this regard, gaining knowledge and information heads such purposes followed by diversion and distraction. Maintaining social relationships and being up-to-date respectively rank third and fourth in our account. In addition, while more than a fourth of the study's sample accede into these social networks to post opinions and participate in discussions, more than a fifth of these have recourse to such social networking outlets to post memories and souvenirs; an eighth of the whole survey's informants participate in forums, b/vlogs through SNSs. Other objectives behind our respondents' involvement with social media avenues, such as work correspondence, freelance – remunerated activities and participation in webinars, but these are very unpopular among our sample.



$Graph_7$: Respondents' involvement with social media networks' purposes.

IV – Discussion:

Indeed, the survey responds to our two research questions and validates both of our study's hypotheses. That is, our study reveals, concerning our first research question, that a huge mass of our sample get involved mostly with four SNSs, namely *WhatsApp*, *FB*, *Youtube* and *Instagram* respectively. In other words, *WhatsApp* is the first most common social network among almost all the study informants. In addition, *FB* is the second most popular SNS amid our respondents while *Youtube* is the third most familiar social media avenue amongst our informants and *Instagram* retains the fourth rank among the social networking outlets that our informants get involved with. Additionally, *Telegram* is widespread among a fourth of the study sample; whereas, more than a fifth of the study participants attend to *Twitter* and *TikTok*. Ultimately, several other SNSs, namely *Snapshat*, *Linkedin*, etc., are brought up by insignificant portions of our poll.

Moreover, regarding the second research question, our study informants get involved with the afore-mentioned networks to achieve a variety of purposes. Approximately, all the respondents claim attending to these SNSs to gain knowledge and information. Another considerable part of our study participants use SNSs for keeping in touch with their friends and family members. Additionally, a sizeable portion of our sample reach out to SNSs for having fun and distraction by watching movies and videos. Likewise, a noteworthy share of

the study's partakers attends to SNSs to be up-to-date and have an eye on the news and current issues. Ultimately, more than a fourth of the poll subjects aim at posting their opinions and participation in discussions about topics of their interest through involvement with such SNSs. In the end, an eighth of the survey informants utilize SNSs to take part in forums, blogs and vlogs. In brief, these various objectives disclose the intentions behind the ascending CJ tendencies of different members of our study respondents.

However, the findings slightly infirm our second hypothesis as the respondents claim getting involved with social media networks to gain knowledge first, then for diversion secondly; while these purposes were reversely introduced in our second hypothesis. That is, we assumed that our informants attend to SNSs for distraction objectives first, then knowledge acquisition second, but the survey participants advocate the reverse.

Conclusion

The findings of any survey can never be unquestionably dependable or 100 % trustworthy. This study's poll can, by no means, accurately tell all what needs to be known about our sample's social media involvement tendencies, usage and motives behind. The population is also quite limited; no study can reasonably claim to encompass all of its informants' community. Dolf Zillmann and Bryant Jennings (1994) equally note that many of the survey findings had better be considered suggestive rather than conclusive as the survey respondents' viewpoints need not necessarily be truthful. Therefore, the research participants' point of views cannot accurately expose the genuine reasons that direct their attendance to SNSs. The subjects' standpoints may intentionally disguise the true intentions behind their SNS' exposure choices for a variety of reasons. The authors, in accordance, state that

Consumers may be unaware of the actual determinants of their choices, and should they have reliable introspections of these determinants, they may be unable to articulate them. In addition, they may have cause to distort- in efforts at projecting a favorable image of themselves - whatever they know and can articulate (p. 440).

In other words, viewers may not be conscious about the real drives that guide their watching patterns or may not be able to verbalize them altogether. Audience members might, as well, deliberately alter their responses in order to communicate not only a positive, but also an auspicious impression of themselves; and, thereby, they would mislead the researcher. Accordingly, survey results need to be approached prudentially and cautiously.

I also tend to think that the poll queries should have been formulated in Moroccan or Standard Arabic so that it would be more comprehensible to involve Moroccan individuals who are not, or are slightly literate in English because this category tends to use social media networks quite more frequently than those who are involved in education since they happen to have more free time while in their factories, shops, shepherd or simply unemployed. So, it would be worthwhile to replicate this study with a survey in Moroccan or Standard Arabic.

Nonetheless, this study brings about knowledgeable insight and interesting notions about Moroccan individuals' social media networks' involvement and tendencies.

A case in point is currently taking place at the moment of concluding this work in July 14 – 15th, 2022 as a huge number of Moroccan netizens are taking to SNS, especially FB and Twitter to articulate their anger and dissatisfaction with the exorbitant rise in gasoline prices. These members are involved in a hacktivism campaign by posting a hashtag and pictures calling for a considerable decrease in fuel prices and the resignation of the head of the government. While being an instance of CJ, such revendication involvement always soars in crisis-related times, but shifts to other objectives or interests when these hardships wane.

Likewise, while the weight and importance of CJ can neither be overlooked nor underestimated in the current digital world, we strongly recommend engaging citizen journalists in some training forms. Such training is strongly needed to equip these participatory journalists not only with the necessary tools susceptible to advance their mission, but also with journalism – related code of ethics. The latter is strongly recommended so that citizen journalists would practice such mission more responsibly and ethically.

This training and code of ethics need also to be accompanied by a body of laws most likely to safeguard the journalism mission from irresponsible and asocial so-called journalists whose posts may threaten social order, tarnish individuals and businesses' reputation. While it is true that technological development encourages the proliferation of social media networks and applications as well as the mushrooming of citizen journalists who practice the ideals of democracy, some regulation is needed so that the latter do not abuse the freedom of expression communication platforms offer and curb the flow of fake news. Ultimately, the public needs to be media literate in order to be able to analyze, evaluate and decode media messages more critically, thoughtfully and conscientiously.

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